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OCEAN CITY -- The economic damage slot machine gambling could do in Worcester County is a powerful argument against allowing it at Ocean Downs Racetrack in Berlin, Sen. J. Lowell Stoltzfus, R-38-Somerset, said Friday.

"Ocean City is a well-oiled economic machine," he said of the resort, which delivers millions in property and income taxes to county government. "We just cannot afford to tamper with a successful operation. For us to tamper with something like that is just unconscionable."

Stoltzfus said slot machine gaming just miles outside the town's borders could devastate traditional businesses in Ocean City.

A week of sustained lobbying by Ocean Downs owner William Rickman has failed to dislodge committed slots opponents such as Stoltzfus and Ocean City's mayor and council.

Rickman's lobbying did win over Berlin's mayor, Rex Hailey, who said he wanted Ocean Downs included in slots legislation at a presentation Rickman gave at his racetrack last week.

At the Tuesday meeting, Rickman said he thought a majority of county residents would support slots if given the chance in a referendum, something Worcester County Commissioners have asked the General Assembly's Eastern Shore Delegation to consider.

Yet Stoltzfus said he would not advocate in the Senate for a slots referendum. The Senate has already passed Republican Gov. Robert Ehrlich's slots bill without Stoltzfus's vote.

"I don't see any support for it, frankly," he said of a referendum. "I personally don't feel comfortable with it."

Stoltzfus said majority support in the county fell against slots, not for them.

"It's not just Ocean City," he said. "There is very loud opposition throughout the state."

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But the Senate's minority leader said he remained the governor's ally despite their differences on the issue.

"There's no two people that agree on everything, not even a husband and wife," he said.

Though Stoltzfus is a conservative Republican and a partisan colleague of the governor, slot machines are an apolitical issue, said Nancy Howard, an Ocean City councilwoman and chairwoman of Worcester County's Democratic Central Committee.

"There are just as many Democrats who are for it as there are Republicans who are against it," Howard said. "This is one of those issues where people are crossing party lines and voting their beliefs."

Howard is a firm opponent of gambling statewide.

"When you want something, and need something, you pay for it. If government needs cutting, you cut government," she said. "You just don't balance the budget on something like gambling."

Pat Schrawder, chairwoman of Worcester County's Republican Central Committee, said slot machines could be the "best, least painful way" to tackle the state's deficit. But she noted that Stoltzfus, Ocean City leaders and others were pressing hard to keep Ocean Downs off the table in any case.

"The senator has always been opposed to slots in Worcester," she said. "Business owners in Ocean City are very much concerned about it, although I don't get the sense that their opposition is from a moral standpoint."

Stoltzfus said the economic danger to the county was his main reason for opposing slots here. In a phone interview, he also expressed distaste for the idea of gambling as entertainment, citing Atlantic City in New Jersey as the future Ocean City should avoid.

"Once you get outside the glitz of the casinos, you have all sorts of adult shops, and the crime rate has significantly increased," Stoltzfus said.

Another Republican Eastern Shore senator, Richard Colburn, R-37-Dorchester, held a public hearing on slots in Cambridge last week. Two days later, Colburn introduced a bill seeking a straw poll on slots for November's ballot.

Stoltzfus said he has no plans for a town hall meeting now, weeks after the Senate voted on its slots bill.

"It's a mystery to me why that happened in Dorchester County, it really is," he said. "I have no interest in that whatsoever. It causes a lot of emotions to get elevated."

Schrawder said she understood why the idea of a referendum doesn't appeal to some politicians.

"How does an elected official best serve their constituents?" she asked rhetorically. "To do the wishes of the constituents? Or is it more responsible to say, 'You've elected me, I have to use my best judgment?' They're (the elected officials) deciding with the benefit of more facts."

Some concerns about Ocean Downs and slots have little to do with moral or economic matters. For some Ocean Pines and Berlin residents, traffic headaches could be a problem, County Commissioner Judy Boggs pointed out this week. Route 589, as it passes Ocean Downs' entrances, is a three-lane road, with only one lane to bring vehicles from

Route 50 to the racetrack.

"The road is maxed out anyway," Boggs said. "That's not a pro or con slots concern."

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